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Murkowski risks salmon for gold mine

Anchorage Daily News (AK)-December 1, 2005
Author: ALAN BORAAS

COMMENT
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Commentary

A proposal by the Murkowski administration would allow the dumping of untreated effluent (sewage, tailings, etc.) into Alaska's salmon streams at the discretion of the state. So far that's been illegal, but this will change if the so-called mixing zones proposal becomes policy.

Previous efforts to permit mixing zones have met with resistance from an unlikely alliance of commercial, subsistence and sportfishing groups. In addition the Kenai Peninsula, Lake and Peninsula, and Ketchikan Gateway boroughs, none of which are exactly radical environmentalist camps, among others have gone on record opposing mixing zones.

So, who's behind the push to create mixing zones that nobody seems to be taking credit for? According to a Daily News article, Bob Shavelson of Cook Inlet Keeper points to Northern Dynasty's giant Pebble Mine as the likely beneficiary of such a policy change.

The Pebble Mine and its neighboring "Big Chunk" have been quietly progressing toward obtaining the permits necessary to extract gold, copper and molybdenum from Alaska. Their plan is to pulverize rock from open-pit mines within an area two-thirds the size of the Kenai Peninsula north of Lake Iliamna. Then they will extract the gold with cyanide and truck the ore over the Chigmit Mountains to Cook Inlet where it will be shipped to Asia for processing. If all goes as planned, you might be able to get a sweet deal at Wal-Mart on a ring made in China from Alaska gold.

But Northern Dynasty has a significant problem.

The Pebble Mine sits smack on a divide that drains west toward the Nushagak River via the Kaktuli, southeast toward Lake Iliamna and northeast toward Lake Clark via the Chulitna. Unlike other major mines in the state that operate in nonanadromous areas, the Pebble complex would potentially affect the headwaters of the largest run of wild salmon in the world. Northern Dynasty intends to retain in perpetuity the toxic materials exposed from pulverizing the mountains behind a huge holding dam built to prevent contamination. If the law were changed as proposed by the Murkowski administration to permit pollution of salmon streams, the Pebble Mine operators would be absolved of responsibility if a breach of the holding dam were to occur because of a volcanic eruption, earthquake or human error. Critics believe such a breach is inevitable. Mine owners are aware even a small release of contamination could bankrupt the operation under present law. So the mine would be a huge ! beneficiary of the proposed mixing zone regulation.

On their Web sites Northern Dynasty and its major financier, Galahad Gold of London, woo hedge-fund investors to the Pebble project boasting the mine would operate in a "politically friendly" environment. Apparently they are referring to the Murkowski administration, and the mixing zone proposal is evidence of significant friendliness. Unlike the hard line the Egan, Hickel and Hammond administrations took toward corporate responsibility of Alaska's environment, the Murkowski mixing zone proposal would downgrade protection of the single most important renewable resource the state has.

Not all jurisdictions in Alaska are all that "politically friendly" to the mine. The indigenous people of the area most impacted by the Pebble project, the people of Nondalton, Iliamna, Pedro Bay and Newhalen, have gone on record as against the mine through actions of their village councils. As long as Gov. Frank Murkowski is in office, the mine developers apparently believe the environmental obstacles can be overcome through administrative actions such as the mixing zone proposal accompanied by an aggressive public relations campaign. But indigenous resistance may be the mine's Waterloo. In plywood-and-tin community halls, feisty little village councils are taking on the financial giants of the world's mining industry and their friends in Juneau. Make no mistake, most rural Alaskans would welcome the jobs. But they have determined the trade-off is too costly if mining development means dirty water in their salmon streams, noise and traffic running off the caribou, dust in the air and a four-mile-long holding dam full of toxic metals waiting for the next earthquake.

If you don't mind a few floaters in your salmon streams and a little mercury in your wild salmon, you'll want to support the Murkowski administrations mixing zone proposal. If not, you have until Dec. 19 to comment.

Alan Boraas is a professor of anthropology at Kenai Peninsula College.

Graphic 1: BORAAS_BW_120105.eps
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